

*SBT-AE-003. The Forsaken Merman. Matthew Arnold Poem.
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The Forsaken Merman By Matthew Arnold A Creation of Beauty. Appreciation By P S Remesh Chandran

Editor, Sahyadri Books & Bloom Books, Trivandrum



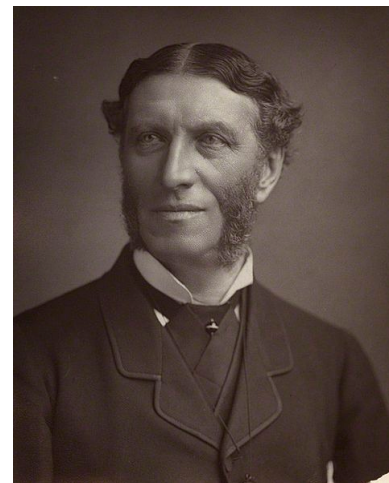
By [PSRemeshChandra](#), 13th Mar 2011. Short URL
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Drama & Criticism
Link: <http://sahyadribooks-remesh.blogspot.in/2012/01/03the-forsaken-merman-matthew-arnold.html>

Matthew Arnold was a severe critic of literature. Essays In Criticism was his monumental work in which he let no great poet go unscathed. Usually such critics would be asked a question: why don't you write a great poem? The Forsaken Merman was Arnold's answer to this question in which he proved not only could he create poems with hilarious themes but incorporate multi tunes also into a single poem. After creating a few more poems, he returned to academics and criticism.

The Cornish legend holds that Matthew can still be heard singing from the deep sea.

01. Matthew Arnold Portrait 1883.

Matthew Arnold relates a very strange story in his poem The Forsaken Merman. The poem is beautiful and picture-like, descriptions of seascape and landscape vivid, and presentation of the theme logical. But the story is actually impossible to happen, and the inspiration for this theme has been traced to a spectacular sea-side village named Zennor in the County of Cornwall in England. It is not clear whether he happened to visit this village



or not, but there indeed is a Mermaid Chair in the Zennor Church and also an associated legend of a hero having this poet's name, Matthew. Perhaps Arnold might have heard or read about this legend. A mermaid who lived in the Pendour Cove in Zennor was entranced by Matthew's exotic singing in the church and she regularly visited the church in disguise. One day Matthew found out, fell deeply in love with her, and followed her to her deep-sea cavern beneath the waves. They were never seen again on the land. The Cornish legend holds that, in silent nights, Matthew can still be heard singing from the deep sea, the sweet music faintly brought to shore by the breeze. Matthew Arnold only reversed the role of characters in his poem- it was the woman who went to the sea in the poem and later returned to land, abandoning her husband and children.

A lady from the land making her home in the deep sea cavern.



02. Ocean is nothing but land submerged.

Margaret, a lady from the land, happened to fall in love with and marry a King of the Sea, a merman. She now has her home and her children in a cavern in the deep sea where they live. The winds are all asleep there. We know the wind rages only on the surface, and beneath it, everything is calm except for ocean currents. The cavern is sand-strewn, cool and deep, and cold and dark as the abyss is. Sea plants, sea animals and sea snakes coil and

twine all around their home. Sometimes great whales could be seen swimming by, like the great ships moving on the surface of the sea. Margaret has a loving husband and endeared children in that abysmal wonderland and she is now leading a happy and contented life in the depth of the sea, apparently.

Life arriving alighted on meteorites from cosmic realms.

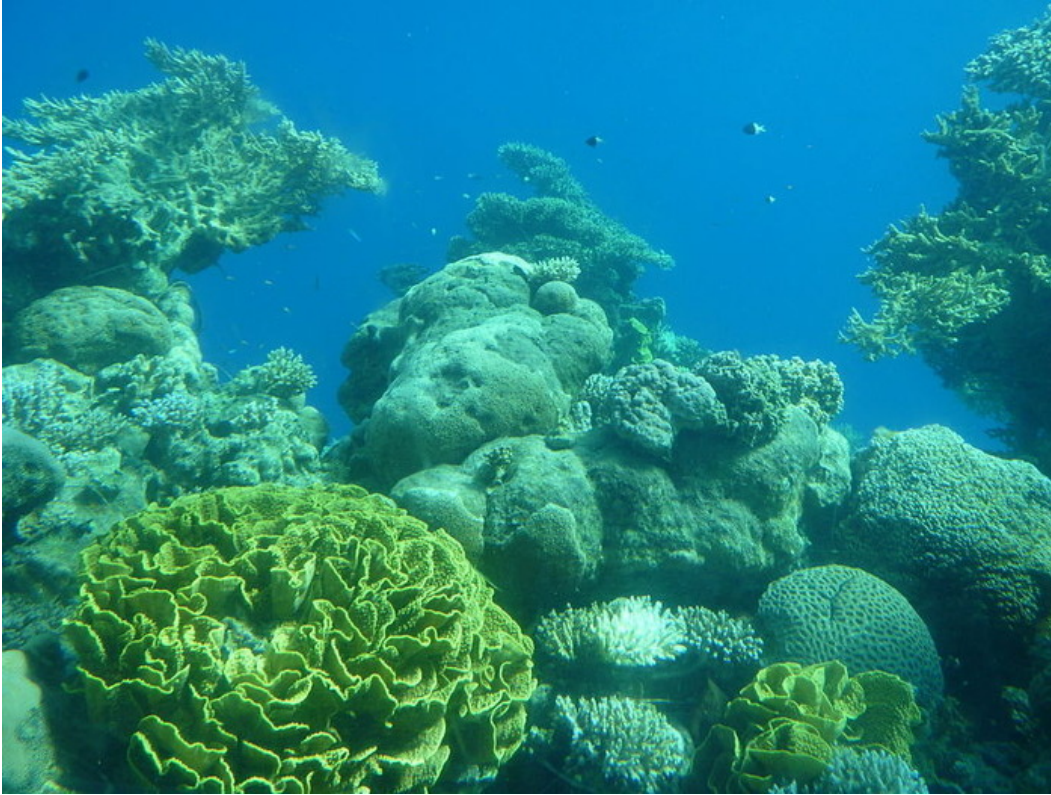


03. Lady from the land makes home in sea cavern.

Days of festivities in the land are endeared and nostalgic to all terrestrial human beings living far away from land. One day, on a silent Christmas night, the sounds of pealing church bells from the land reach the ocean bottom. Man is mortal, temperamental and selfish. But the watery world is something precious, rare and ethereal. Ocean is where life originated, smithereens of which arrived alighted on meteorites from cosmic realms unimaginably distant, and deposited there on the ocean aeons ago. Considering the longevity or brevity of the history of life on sea or life on land, there is difference in the subtlety of these living forms' loyalty to the place of their origin and habitat. Sea life is ancient and primeval whereas land life is recent and experimental, aged only a few million years. The sea

demands much in loyalty from her inhabitants but the loyalty of land-locked beings to the place of origin of their life is brittle and untested. This test of character is what we are going to see in the poem now.

Church bells from the land reach where the winds are all asleep.



04. Where the winds are all asleep.

Hearing the toll of church bells from far away land, Margaret becomes home-sick and wishes to rise to the surface, reach land and take part in the Christmas festivities there. She forgets she is a mother and wife now. It is terrible and strange that she has become tired of sea-life by overnight. Or has she been always disliking sea life but pretending to liking it- the terrestrial conceit of a woman? She says:

"It will be Easter time in the world- ah me!
And I loose my poor soul Merman, here with thee."

It means, it is mirth and happiness in the upper world, but ah me- I am

doomed in sorrow and isolation in the nether world. She asked her merman's permission to go to land and he generously gives it. So, with her loving husband's permission, she rises from the sea and reaches her home in land. The land has its thrills, beauties and enjoyments just as the sea has its. Soon Margaret forgets her family left behind in the deep sea.

From the deep sea in search of beloved wife.



05. The church on the hill side.

Mermen and angels are thought to be alike in many respects. Ardence, affection, kindness and mercy are their characteristics. Monarchs of the deep, reflecting the magnanimity and loftiness of the limitless ocean, keep their vows of chastity and integrity. The King of the Sea waited long for his wife's return from the land. At last, being anxious, one day, with their children, he too rises from the sea, comes to land and visits the church where Margaret usually prayed.

Generations of grief in the tumultuous soul of the holy trinity.



06. From the deep sea in search of beloved wife.

They secretly stood outside and peeped inside through the church window. Being not humans and therefore aliens in land, they dared not go inside. This grief-stricken trio consisting of father, daughter and son knew nothing about the Christian kindness that may or may not be flowing through that church. They were a holy trinity unto themselves, stricken by grief. Generations of grief - creative grief - had been what caused that cosmic particle from stars deposited aeons ago on the ocean to germinate, grow and evolve into life forms. Wind and waves and sky, and the warmth of the earth, could never have quietened the tumult in their souls. God manifests through man in his acts of kindness, consideration and ardence. It is man's debt to his creator to quieten and pacify the minds of others. Won't humans ever pay their debts to their gods?

A mother of ingratitude, her eyes sealed to the holy book.

Margaret's face was buried deep in the Bible. Through mutually understandable gestures, the Merman King tried in many ways to signal to her that their children very much longed for her. He asked the children to call and appeal to the motherhood in her in their tiny voices, in the hope that children's voices would be dear to a mother's ear. The children called their mother in their voices familiar to her. It was all in vain. She listened not.

‘She gave them never a look, for her eyes were sealed to the holy book!’ It is the first time the readers of this poem curse and hate the holy book. Is the

07. Steps to the Church where Aliens walked.

holy book an excuse for causing pangs of pain in other hearts? To alleviate the pain in other hearts, to act as the representative of God- that was what human beings were sent to the world for and given the holy book. She was pretending. So it was useless persuading her to go back with them to the sea, they learned. She was determined not to return to sea.

We will gaze from the sand hills, at the white sleeping town.



Before returning to sea with his children, the Merman once again visited the church and the town where his wife lived. He could see she was living a very happy and contented life. She was seen always singing of supreme joy. 'She sang her fill, singing most joyfully.' However, the merman could see a tear dropping down her sorrow-clouded eye. She was, must have been, actually sad for her children left at sea. The cold, strange eyes of her little girl child looking at her through the cold church window must have created pangs in her guilty soul. The insolent indifference of this earthly woman orphaned her little children then and there. So, the disappointed merman with his children decided to return to sea. Before he goes, he proposes to his children to visit the land in moonlit nights again. They would come and see the church and the town by nights. He sings:



08. Her eyes were sealed to the Holy Book.

"We will gaze from the sand-hills
At the white sleeping town,
At the church on the hill side
And then come back down."

The pain in the eyes of a girl-child left out by her mother.



09. We will gaze from the sand hills.

Matthew Arnold created the closing lines of this poem ever memorable. The grief of a girl-child who is left out and abandoned by her beloved mother can never be, and shall be, described in words. It is unspeakable taboo, sacred. Tennyson perfectly put this more touchingly than anyone in his sensational classic, *In Memoriam*:

‘I sometimes feel it is a guilt
To put in words the grief I feel.’

The readers will never forget the pain in the cold strange eyes of the girl-child looking at her mother through the church windows. Arnold wished to make the world weep with his poem; he succeeded.

A special note on Matthew Arnold and his musical experiment.



10. We will gaze from the sand hills at the lost town.

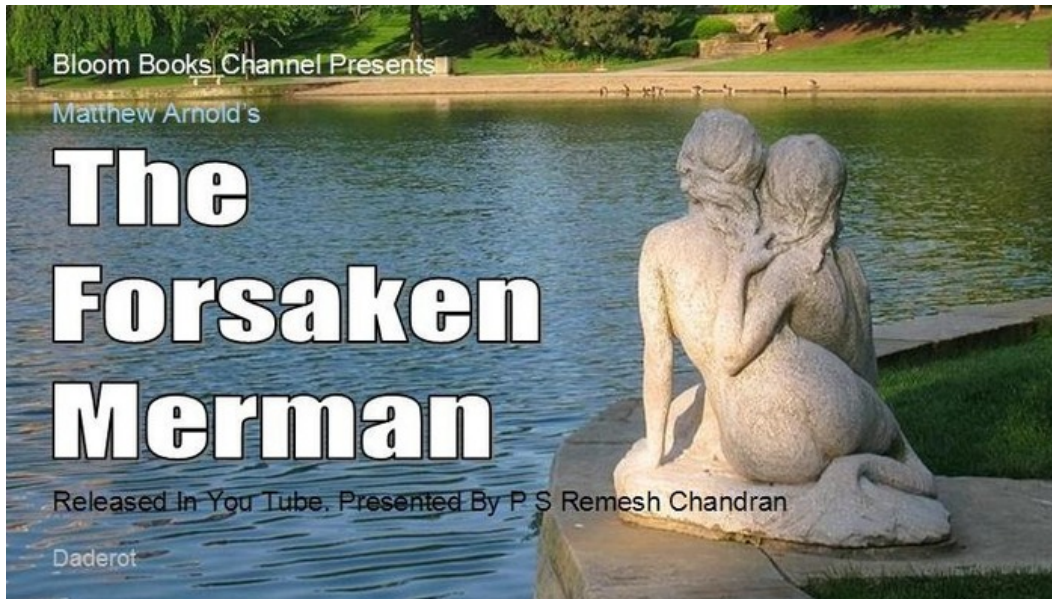
Matthew Arnold was the son of Thomas Arnold, the famous teacher who introduced the Public School System in England. The son did not fail his father even once, and not only shone like a star in literature, but excelled as an Academic and Inspector of Schools also. Even though he was a critic in his blood, we will forget he is, once we get deep into his poems. He is a very imaginative and gifted poet by birth too. What he really was- a fine critic or a finer poet- perhaps he himself might not have known well. Anyway, his over-indulgence in and unquenched thirst for literary criticism was responsible for the scantiness of his poems. We would wish, had he produced more poems. His creations in both fields are excellent and equally respected.

It is known that no one has ever orchestrated *The Forsaken Merman* in full, which is great loss to the world. Matthew Arnold used a variety of exotic tunes in the song to express each move and twist in mood appropriately and touchingly along the song which, it seems, he conceived as a complete musical entertainment for the world. I approached this song not as an academic but as an appreciator, an enjoyer, earnestly trying to sing it. I was thrilled at my success, at how Matthew Arnold was there to guide me

through the movements of music in each line, through each phrase. I did nothing exceptional or special in my endeavour but sang it repeatedly with love till the original music unfolded itself; the original tune which was in the poet's mind while writing this poem clicked and opened automatically, as a favour to me. I felt it was the poet's gift to generations beyond ages. It was like simplicity and humbleness unlocking a closed and secured thing of precious beauty through perseverance and consistence; academic achievements and pedagogical experience have nothing to do with it. It was that simple. It must be said that this clever poet skillfully locked his lines and hid his music to prevent the lazy and the haughty from accessing the sublime beauty in them. He wished only the genuinely interested and adequately unorthodox persons to succeed in singing his lines.

The musical experiment Matthew Arnold did in *The Forsaken Merman* is unique in the field of music as well as in the field of literature. Only one other poet has ever attempted such a bold, thrilling experiment in music as well as in literature. It was Alfred Lord Tennyson, and the poem was *The Lotos-Eaters*. In this song Tennyson invented and used a number of tunes to move in synchronization with the tantalizingly changing actions of his intoxicated characters. He adapted even the swaying to-and-fro motions of the ship carrying the lotos-eaten dreamers to the island to corresponding movements in the music in this poem. The world is still waiting for good orchestrated and choreographed versions of *The Forsaken Merman* and *The Lotos-Eaters*. They are yet to come, but they will come indeed.

Bloom Books Channel has a video of this poem.



11. *The Forsaken Merman* Video Title.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKkurqG5zp8>

A primitive prototype rendering of this song was made in a crude tape recorder decades earlier, in 1984. In 2014, a home made video of this song was released. In 2015, a third version with comparatively better audio was released. The next version, it's hoped, would be fully orchestrated. It's free for reuse, and anyone interested can develop and build on it, till it becomes a fine musical video production, to help our little learners, and their teachers.

You Tube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKkurqG5zp8>

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08. We will gaze from the sand hills. By Steve Cadman, London UK.

09. We will gaze at the lost town. By Daderot. Mermaid Statue at Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio.

10. The Forsaken Merman Video Title. By Bloom Books Channel

11. Author profile of P S Remesh Chandran By Sahyadri Archives.

About the author and accessing his other literary works.



Editor of Sahyadri Books & Bloom Books, Trivandrum. Author of several books in English and in Malayalam. And also author of 'Swan, The Intelligent Picture Book'. Edits and owns Bloom Books Channel. Born and brought up in Nanniyode, a little village in the Sahya Mountain Valley in Kerala. Father British Council-trained English Teacher and mother university-educated. Matriculation with High First Class, Pre Degree studies in Science with National Merit Scholarship, discontinued Diploma Studies in Electronics and entered politics. Unmarried and single.

12. Author Profile of P S Remesh Chandran By Sahyadri

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[Rathnashikamani](#)

31st Mar 2011 (<#>)

Your works are just master pieces.

You have enriched my experience of reading and writing at Wikinut.



[PSRemeshChandra](#)

22nd Jan 2012 (<#>)

Wikinut already is a place rich in experienced writers and readers. I know it is full of master craftsmen, you one of the foremost among them. I really enjoy being and working among geniuses, the real inspiration and upliftment for me, to be enjoyed only once in a lifetime. Thank you Rathnashikamani.



[Merawyn J Harrison](#)

27th Jul 2011 (<#>)

A poem I have loved since a child (Also Dover Beach and Rustum and Sohrab). Always remembered the line 'Long prayers', I said, 'in the world they say'. "Christians pray volubly but are often quite cruel in their thinking (or lack of).



[PSRemeshChandra](#)

22nd Jan 2012 (#)

The Persian Poet Firdausi's epic is a fine creation in the world literature. The first part of this epic, The Birth Of Rostum was excellently translated into English around 1787 by Mr. Joseph Champion of the East India Company who worked in Bengal as the Company Pay Master. The second part Sohrab Is Born and the third part Rostum Slays Sohrab were both translated probably in 1817 by Doctor James Atkinson, the famous professor and surgeon in the British India Service, again in Bengal. The concluding fourth part, Rostum And Akwan Dev was translated by the Cambridge scholar Edward Henry Palmer. These were fine translations which brought this epic to common man's attention. The Forsaken Merman equals the frantic imaginations of the Persian mind. Because I sing this song, I know it by heart, and often have taught it without a book. Thank you Merawyn J. Harrison for sharing similar intimate feelings.



Aishu

14th Apr 2012 (#)

Fantastic work sir. Really hands off to you. Looking forward to your forthcoming articles.



[PSRemeshChandra](#)

16th Apr 2012 (#)

Thank you Aishu for enjoying the work.

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